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ABSTRACT

At any level, good writing requires an acknowledgment of writing strengths and weaknesses by both student and instructor. The four project collaborators/writing teachers outlined six specific areas on a teacher feedback sheet to note students' writing strengths and weaknesses; the areas of purpose, audience, thesis, development, organization, and language usage were examined in students' papers. While the teachers specifically looked for these six global issues and lower order grammatical concerns in their students' papers, one of the teachers noticed during the peer group process that her students were beginning to correct these six areas of revision themselves. This paper discusses these six areas of writing strengths and weaknesses as reflected in the papers written by students in this collaborative project. The paper concludes that, overall in this project, perhaps one lesson that all of the students learned was that despite ability or experience, a goal was met and learning did in fact occur. (NKA)

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by Julie Lumpkins

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CS 510 534

Collaborative Teaching, Collaborative Learning: Expanding Communities of Writing Teachers and Students Cross Institutional Boundaries

Conference on College Composition and Communication

Denver, Colorado

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IV: Crossing Institutional Boundaries: Writing Strengths and Weaknesses

Julie Lumpkins

Austin J. App once said, "three things are necessary for writing: a good head, a thick skin, and a soft heart." At any level, good writing requires an acknowledgement of writing strengths and weaknesses by both student and instructor. I remember the day I introduced the collaborative idea to my students. Their feedback, at first in the form of body language, suggested that they were fearful of making more significant writing mistakes than the students at Bryan or MTSU. The Pre-Institutional Perceptions Questionnaire seemed to suggest the same findings with over half of the class believing that four-year private institutions enrolled "the greatest number of students who are academically prepared for college work." Only 4 percent of my class believed that a two-year public institution enrolled academically prepared students. What I discovered in my class during the first initial days of the project was that my students believed their weaknesses would far outweigh their strengths. I remember one student who remarked on a post-it note on her first draft: "I know this is not up to par with the rest of the MTSU and Bryan College classes, but it is a start, and I am willing to work harder." What my students were unaware of at the time was that all writers have strengths and weaknesses regardless of geographic location, age, gender, race, or writing facility.

After the students formulated what is called the teacher's draft (a revision of their peer drafts), six specific areas were outlined on a teacher feedback sheet to note students' writing strengths and weaknesses. The areas of purpose, audience, thesis, development, organization, and language usage were examined in students' papers.

While Ayne, Maria, Ray, and I specifically looked for these six global issues and lower order grammatical concerns in our students' papers, I noticed during the peer group process that my students were beginning to correct these six areas of revision themselves. For purpose, we set the same standards whereas our students would meet satisfactory requirements: "using information gleaned from an interview but without referring to him/herself and to the interview itself in the essay" while profiling a place or activity and offering an interpretation of the subject as required by the essay genre assignment. Since research suggests that first year writers "write as they talk," students struggle with third person voice, shifting into first and second person on occasions. Some of the mistakes with purpose were identified by the peer groups as one MTSU student comments:

> All my members of my peer group commented [sic] on my use of 'first person' in my essay, which I quickly corrected, and in turn made it sound, and flow better.

Identifying a writing purpose was a challenge for all of our classes and I think the students soon learned that regardless of what school they attended, all first year writers shared similar weaknesses and strengths in dealing with purpose. One student from Bryan had a preconceived notion that his "peer group members' papers were going to be awful. Instead they were very well written and informative." Although two students (one from MTSU and one from CSCC) noted that their peers did not completely

formulate to the assignment's purpose, overall a majority of students felt they all shared one strength in common- they learned, causing ". . . everyone involved to think and open their minds to what others think and believe."

I will note that audience was also a global issue many of the writers found challenging. While students were given the audience of college peers, some weaknesses occurred in students' papers as they viewed their audience in general terms. The weaknesses dealt more with "adapting content and language" to an audience. One student generally targeted "the people of Rhea County;" while another student only targeted "three students" in her peer group. While the target audience was intended to be college freshmen at all three institutions, some students had trouble identifying some important demographics-age being a major factor. All of our classes were varied in age, with CSCC representing non-traditional students, and MTSU and Byran representing more traditional students. Thus, my students from a two-year institution profiled places that included activities for returning mothers, single fathers, and the like (which sometimes automatically eliminated a younger audience). Other factors included geographic area (as Ray noted) in which one student was surprised that a Bryan College student was from Nigeria. With any first year writers, age, race, and gender are important factors that are sometimes overlooked when selecting an audience. However, I did notice more strengths in audience than anticipated; since a difficult part of this assignment came with writing about places outside the colleges, such as a historical home, our writers made a direct connection to their audience as one student writes in his thesis: "The Stones River Battlefield is an interesting place for Southerners, history lovers, and students alike to visit Murfreesboro." Also, students were able to write this

assignment from a their point of view as one student writes, "Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is full of inviting and affordable restaurants", by locating their subject in context of college life. Students were also aware of prejudices that their readers may hold as one student writes, "Most people think that when students come to Bryan College they will never have a life because there is nothing to do in Dayton, Tennessee." While writing from different demographics proved to be a challenge for all four classes, students did demonstrate a sophistication in their writing as they showed evidence of adaptation in their writing. Our students made an important discovery about the way they perceived audiences and the way in which they wrote to an audience as one Bryan student suggests:

> I learned not to be so hard on myself, I'm not such a bad writer after all! When an essay is written, it's not supposed to be written like the audience knows what the writer is talking about. He has to be specific because the audience, supposedly, is ignorant to his topic.

And another student remarks that "it (working with students from MTSU and CSCC) taught me that I need to concentrate more on my audience and what their needs are in reading my essay." Thus, while there were weaknesses (I say generalities) in some audience selections, for the most part, the majority of students agreed that considering an audience of peers made writing easier, especially since their peers were via e-mail.

Another area of writing that produced both weaknesses and strengths included the thesis statement. One goal of this paper was to produce "a clear, specific, and appropriate thesis that gives a dominant impression or interpretation of the subject being profiled." One major area of weakness in thesis writing was directly connected to a lack of audience

awareness as I mentioned a moment ago. Several students did not offer "a dominant impression" about their profiled subject. Occasionally, students forgot that their audience would not be aware of their subject matter as one of my students failed to mention that Sam Hills was a restaurant with his thesis, "Sam Hills' has a good social atmosphere." While Columbia State students were aware that Sam Hills is a popular restaurant in Maury County, MTSU and Bryan students were not and identifying Sam Hills' as a restaurant only became clear in the third paragraph of the paper as menu items were discussed. Thus, audience in this respect connected directly to the thesis statement. However, peer members were able to make positive suggestions and corrections on the thesis statement as one MTSU student notes, "my final peer however, was clear and precise on how to make my thesis fit into my paper." And another student was relieved to know that all first year writers experience trouble with the thesis statement- "I noticed that some of the problems that my peers were encountering were the same problems I was having in the context of the thesis development and relevance."

Organization and development played another major role in this project as students overcame their weaknesses and created writing strengths. While audience, purpose, and thesis (the major global issues) were taught relatively the same (with an audience assigned and the like), organization differed in a unique way. Since instructors teach development and organization in different ways (including minor differences between Maria, Ayne, Ray, and I) students discovered multiple ways of organizing. However, our students remarked on similar problems with organization as one MTSU student remarks:

> My main problem was using transitions. I have a great deal of difficulty with it. They suggested combining sentences to make the paper flow smoother. One of them also told me the paper did not sound right in a few places. He suggested that I read it aloud and I would find these areas. I was surprised to see the ideas of the other member. I thought I was clear about everything, but some things may have been unclear.

Like organization, with development-new challenges were met by all of the students. Since this paper required an interview (documented in MLA), students had yet to face another challenge: what questions to ask, how long to conduct an interview, and how to interpret interviewed material in the context of their papers. Using a living source introduced students to a new way of researching. Their perceptions of only finding material in a book or journal dissipated.

Students also found weaknesses and strengths in correcting "language that expresses an appropriate tone toward the subject and audience and avoid grammatical and mechanical errors that detract from the essay's message." Some students found it difficult to respond to grammar errors via e-mail. Likewise, some students commented they were afraid to point out grammar errors since they were unsure of the mistakes themselves as one student claims: "Maybe I'm wrong, I don't like giving my comments knowing that they are incorrect and do my peers more harm than help." Another student remarks, ". . . I'm not a very good English and grammar guy . . ." However, students soon learned that being a peer respondent was a task that got better through practice. One student commented that discovering grammatical problems is not solely the responsibility of the peer respondent since "you must constantly be questioning your own work, looking

for small errors on description and content." She offers this advice: "Read your paper as if you were a person from another country, having no prior knowledge of your topic. If it doesn't make sense then editing is in order." On a positive note, students were able to recognize the importance of revising both lower and higher order concerns in their paper.

Overall in this project perhaps one lesson that all of our students learned was that despite ability or experience, a goal was met and learning did in fact occur. One student notes: "collaborating with other students taught me that even though someone is critical about your writing, they are just trying to help you do better in writing a paper." Another student learned a lesson of humility-"I've learned that not everyone will praise your paper. I believe also that I shouldn't take that personal. That's what I've learned." But perhaps a student from Bryan College said it best when he commented, "I liked the challenge that was involved in writing Essay 3 because it stretched my mind and patience. I think that with more practice and refinement, this project will be very helpful to each student involved because [it] gives us the opportunity to look beyond the confinement of our own schools."

I must admit during the final correspondence between peer groups, I was sad to see the project end, but I realized that what the students gained (writing ability and experience) was not the end of the project, but the beginning of writing maturity. As I collected folders on the last day of class, I noticed the folder on top of the stack with a quote written in the left hand corner; it said-"writing is a design, often a portrait, nearly always a revelation." Suddenly the revelation was all too clear-the joy of accomplishing the task of writing is what we all share in common, despite age, race, gender, geographic location, and most of all experience.